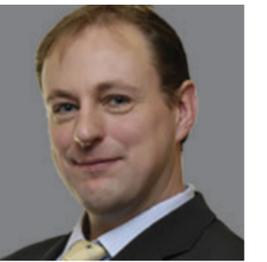


# THE RACE FOR 236

By  
James  
Willoughby



## Record for annual haul of winners now the target for Johnston team

**B**obby Axelrod sits in the stands of an empty race track, only the floodlights illuminating the spot where he and his menacing legal counsel have chosen.

“In many ways this place made me,” says the antihero of *Billions*, the American TV series.

“There’s nowhere that the stark difference between winners and losers is more clear.”

Axelrod is right. Set an appropriate target and, at the end of the year, you can add up the winners and receive a clear idea of how you have done.

Now, if I knew anything about the world of dizzying,

high finance, I might find myself incredulous at some of the stories laid out in *Billions*. But my naivete enables the suspension of disbelief, and this makes the underlying themes of the show so compelling a piece of fiction.

It’s a typical experience of viewing your favourite melodrama that some of the lines specific to a particular meander of the narrative actually resonate with your own life. What Axelrod is saying in the first scene of Season 2 is so consistent with my own outlook that I wanted so much to flesh out the concept on my return to the pages of the *Kingsley Klarion*.

Let me repurpose the words of one of my heroes, the hugely influential US racing writer Andy Beyer, yet again: “A man who writes a book may have to wait a lifetime for the judgment of history; success at the race track is completely unambiguous.”

While success and failure in life is often blurred by circumstance, or it depends on the good opinion of others, horse racing – and sport in general – draws a line between those two impostors, sometimes with ruthless efficiency. Sometimes, there is nothing we can do to shape our destiny, but we do have one important method of defence. Rationality.

“If you make a plan and stay true to your philosophical ideals, it is easier to evaluate why you succeed or fail”

When I first started following racing as a college student, I was intrigued by the way the great trainers comported themselves. It had mystique. They never quite answered the questions put; they always left a gap between what happened and why it happened. It was easy to think they had the ethereal gift of the savant, the genius.

I was naïve. And it enabled suspension of disbelief. But, when I became professionally engaged as a racing analyst, the feeling of blinkered wonderment soon gave way to hard-charging frustration. I wasn’t so reductive as

to view training as sending quadrupeds up a hill a few times, but in adulthood I yearned to understand the world via the scientific method; that is, by understanding the link between cause and effect

I wanted to ask questions. And I wanted those questions answered. I did not want to invest in the notion that knowledge is to the privileged few, not least because this affronted my own view of the world in a much more general sense.

So, when people now ask me why my views on horse racing seem often to be aligned with Mark Johnston, I try to

explain it is because I believe in rationality. And, when I was new, he was the only one in the sport who took the time to explain himself to me as both a trainer of horses and a leader of people.

Given you are reading this magazine, you probably can recite why it is that Johnston Racing horses race prominently and you probably know why they run more often than those of others. You can probably see the benefit of finding a reason to run, not a reason to hide. And you see why it doesn’t pay to pigeon-hole horses as suited to soft ground or fast ground, or uphill tracks or flat tracks, because all you do is paint yourself into a corner when it comes to placing them.

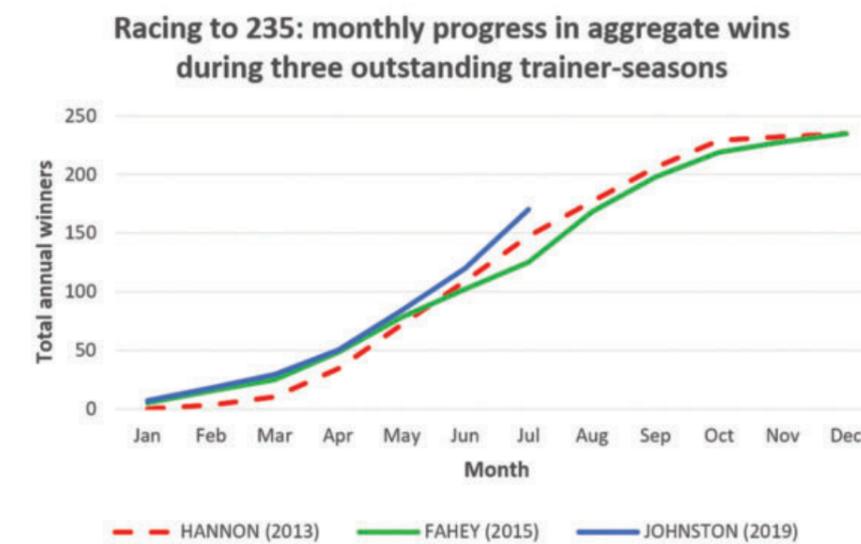
In the 2019 season, we are experiencing the new, higher level of efficiency that Mark, Deirdre, Charlie and the team meet to discuss on a daily basis, then strive towards for the remainder of the day. And each day, one number comes closer and closer: 235, the record number of British winners in a calendar year shared by Richard Hannon Senior (in 2013) and Richard Fahey (in 2015).

For your interest, the table on the left shows the progress of the aggregate of winners for each record season, alongside those of Johnston Racing this year. Following July’s record 50 winners in a month, the reader is left to draw his or her own conclusions.

Rationality isn’t a fancy term. It isn’t management-speak, or one of these new-fangled ideas. It is as old as the hills.

If your actions are motivated by critical thinking, if you make a plan and stay true to your philosophical ideals, it is easier to evaluate why you succeed or fail, easier to improve. In most environments, you need to keep running just to stand still. People learn from the success of others, so the bar is always being raised.

Month	HANNON (2013)	FAHEY (2015)	JOHNSTON (2019)
Jan	0	5	7
Feb	3	15	18
Mar	10	25	29
Apr	34	48	50
May	72	78	84
Jun	109	102	120
Jul	147	125	170
Aug	177	168	
Sep	206	198	
Oct	229	219	
Nov	232	228	
Dec	235	235	



**T**HE ideals which drive Johnston Racing are, to some extent, future-proof, however, because not all trainers are always trying to optimise the same function.

They may be keen to get their horses on a supposedly favourable handicap mark, and waste runs doing so, or may be obsessed with resale value to the detriment of enterprise. (And, in fairness, some may argue that the paltry state of prize-money in British racing forces this imperative upon them.)

Rationality is about thinking what you are doing and having the strength of purpose to carry it out. Sport then allows a clear view for the individual of what has been accomplished. ■

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